

Striving for Humility in the Workplace

We're all hardwired for ego-based thinking...yet in the 21st century success depends on how well we can listen, learn, and collaborate with others. Professor Edward D. Hess explains why humility is the new key to success and why no one should wait any longer to start taming their ego.

"In the tech tsunami of the next few decades, robots and smart machines are projected to take over more than half of U.S. jobs," says Hess, a professor at the University of Virginia's Darden Graduate School of Business and author of *Learn or Die: Using Science to Build a Leading-Edge Learning Organization* (Columbia Business School Publishing, \$29.95, www.EDHLTD.com).

"The jobs that will still be *safe* involve higher-order cognitive and emotional skills that technology can't replicate, like critical thinking, innovation, creativity, and emotionally engaging with other humans," he explains. "All of those skills have one thing in common: They are enabled by humility."

Skeptical? Ask yourself: Have you ever met someone with a big ego who was really good at being open-minded? Really good at reflectively listening? At putting himself in another's shoes?



At playing well with others? At saying, "Your idea is better than mine," or, "You're right"? I didn't think so.

Clearly, if you want to be an effective leader (or a successful employee), you are going to have to rein in your ego and become more team-oriented. And make no mistake, says Hess: It won't be easy.

Suggestions for Honing Your Humility

Hess shares seven suggestions to help managers and employees alike hone their humility.

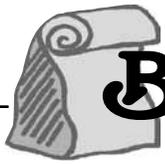
❖ **First, know that you'll have to work against your brain's natural inclinations.**

According to Hess, quieting our egos actually goes against our very nature. Cognitively, humans are wired to selectively process only information that confirms — and to selectively filter out information that contradicts what we "know" to be "right." In addition, we're lazy, self-serving, and emotionally defensive thinkers who are driven to protect our egos!

"However, the science is quite clear that high-level and innovative thinking is a team sport," he comments. "In order to learn, adapt, and succeed, we have to be willing to look closely at our mistakes and failures, to really listen to people who disagree with us, and to allow the best thinking and best ideas to rise to the top — which requires humility! The good news is, when it comes to resisting your thinking's natural defenses, forewarned is forearmed."

❖ **Seek objective feedback about your ego.**

You can't troubleshoot your ego if you don't have an accurate picture of what it looks like. Since this isn't an area in which you can trust your own judgment, have the courage to get people who know you well at work and in your personal life



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to fill out a 360-degree review about you — one that focuses on your emotional intelligence and your behaviors concerning open-mindedness, listening, empathy, humility, and so on.

“Explain why you need honest answers,” instructs Hess. “Emphasize how appreciative you will be if they are honest and that candor will not diminish the relationship. After receiving the data, evaluate it with a trusted confidant. Thank everyone who had the courage to give you honest feedback. Reflect on the picture you received and decide what you want to do with that data.”

❖ **Change your mental model of what “smart” looks like.** In the past, “smartness” has been determined by the size of one’s body of knowledge. Not knowing the “right” answer was — and often still is — a big blow to the ego. But today we already have instant access to all the knowledge we want, thanks to “companions” like Google and Siri. The “new smart” means recognizing what you *don’t* know and understanding how to learn it, being able to ask the right questions, and being able to examine the answers critically.

“As the legendary hedge fund investor Ray Dalio said, ‘We are all dumb shits,’” comments Hess. “We are all suboptimal thinkers. Only those of us who can graciously and humbly admit that we *don’t* know it all will succeed in this new world. So change how you keep score. Engage in collaboration, seek out feedback, and ask for help each day. That will push you toward developing the humility and empathy you’ll need to ‘win’ in the new game.”

❖ **Learn to put yourself in other people’s shoes.** Research says one way to become less self-absorbed and more open to the experiences of others is to actively work on being more empathetic and compassionate. Thinking of how others helped you and saying “thank you” on a daily basis is a positive way to begin the process. Reflecting on the people who add joy to your life helps, too.

“Suspending judgment so that I can put myself in another person’s shoes has always been a

particular challenge for me,” Hess admits. “My mind always wants to jump to a conclusion instead of really considering what the other person is experiencing, thinking, or feeling. Active listening has been an important tool in helping me learn to set my ego aside. When I remind myself to focus all of my attention on what someone else is saying instead of on formulating my own

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response, I find that my understanding of the situation grows — and often, so does the amount of empathy I feel.

“Remember, you don’t have to fully agree with someone’s opinion or actions to still treat them with compassion and respect,” he adds. “Disagreeing with humility still leaves the lines of communication open and allows teamwork to happen in the future.”

❖ **Quiet your mind to stay in the moment.** Hess points to attention-focused

meditation as a time-honored method of calming one's inner self-intensity. Fully engaging with your current experience (as opposed to ruminating on the past or worrying about the future) enables you to maintain a balanced, healthy perspective. Staying in and responding to the present moment is also a powerful safeguard against ego-driven misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

"Personally, I have found that meditation makes me more aware of my physical reactions — breathing and heart rate," he shares. "I now know that when my internal motor gets running really fast I tend to revert to a 'me' syndrome, and that I need to deliberately slow myself down so that I can exhibit more calmness and openness to others. I have come to understand that as a teammate and as a leader I don't have to be right all the time *or* the center of attention all the time — but I *do* have to work with others to arrive at the best answer."

❖ **Stop letting fear drive your decisions.**

We often play it safe because we don't want to look dumb, be wrong, or fail spectacularly in front of our friends and colleagues. In other words, we're afraid of making mistakes and bruising our egos. Hess says being okay with being wrong is a necessary and important part of developing humility.

"Fear of failure, fear of looking bad, fear of embarrassment, fear of a loss of status, fear of not being liked, and fear of losing one's job all inhibit the kind of learning, innovation, and collaboration that's essential for your long-term job security," Hess asserts. "To proceed more fearlessly into the future, you need to understand that learning is *not* an efficient 99% defect-free process — so mistakes have to be valued as learning opportunities.

"The faster and better you are at turning mistakes into learning opportunities, the less likely it is that you will be replaced by some machine," he adds. "Having an ego that's not afraid to acknowledge mistakes, confront weaknesses, and test assumptions is a reliable strategy for long-term success."

❖ **Grade yourself daily.** There's a reason why to-do lists are so popular: They work! Create a checklist of reminders about the need to be humble, open-minded, and empathetic, a good listener, or any other ego-mitigating quality you wish to work on. Make the list as detailed as possible. Review it before every meeting and grade yourself at the end of each meeting. (**Editor's note:** See the Handout section on page 4 for a possible list.)

"To start, I advise picking two behaviors you want to change. Seek the help of people you trust in creating your checklist and ask for their help in holding you accountable. Give them permission to call you out when they see you acting in opposition to your desired new behaviors."

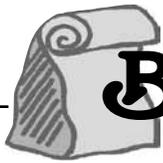
Summary

The journey to becoming a more humble person will not be short. It will take persistent hard work. And it will be a lifelong endeavor — not something that's completed by the end of the year. But Hess firmly believes that you will find the journey to be liberating and fruitful.

"With humility comes more meaningful relationships, better opportunities, and of course, an increased chance of staying relevant and competitive in the Smart Machine Age," he says. "In that age, individualism and internal competition will be out, and teamwork will be in. Self-promotion will be out, and self-reflection will be in. Knowing it all will be out, and being good at not knowing will be in.

"In short, humility will be needed to maximize one's effectiveness at thinking, listening, relating, and collaborating," concludes Hess. "You will need others to help you outthink a smart machine! Work on yourself starting now, so they'll want to engage with you tomorrow. Honing your humility may turn out to be one of the most important decisions you'll ever make." ■

Edward D. Hess is a professor of business administration and Batten Executive-in-Residence at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business and the author of 11 books, including [Learn or Die: Using Science to Build a Leading-Edge Learning Organization](#), by Columbia Business School Publishing.



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Ego Check: Take a Five-Minute Self-Assessment ...

Many people who have big egos don't realize it — they simply think of themselves as competitive, driven, self-assured, or something equally positive. This assessment will help you determine whether or not your ego is too big. Ask yourself: *True or false: Do these statements describe my usual behavior?*

- I rarely say, “I don't know” — especially in public.
- I rarely admit my mistakes.
- I rarely talk about my personal weaknesses with colleagues.
- I don't often ask for personal feedback.
- I dislike compromising when I am debating.
- I interrupt people when they are talking in order to give them the answer.
- I like solving other people's problems.
- I rarely apologize publicly to others when I may have hurt their feelings.
- I rarely ask people how they are feeling.
- I always strive to be the leader.
- I make sure I get the respect I am due.
- I work hard at looking good to others.
- I don't enjoy talking things out with others.

Did you have mostly “trues”? Don't despair. At least you know you have an ego problem.

... Then Grade Yourself Each Day

There's a reason why to-do lists are so popular: They work! Create a checklist of reminders about the need to be humble, open-minded, and empathetic, a good listener, or any other ego-mitigating quality you wish to work on. For example, if you want to work on being a better listener, your list might include the following tasks:

- Do not interrupt others.
- Really focus on understanding the other person.
- Suspend judgment.
- Do not think about your response while the other person is still talking.
- Do not automatically advocate your views in your first response.
- Ask questions to make sure you understand the other person.
- Ask if you can paraphrase what the other person said to make sure you heard them correctly.
- Really try to understand the reasons the other person believes what they believe.

“If you reflect and work on managing yourself every day, you *will* notice a difference in your humility-to-ego ratio,” promises Edward Hess, author of *Learn or Die: Using Science to Build a Leading-Edge Learning Organization*. ■